Saving Lives

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What does "saving lives" really mean? We can envision an air ambulance flying to pick up an accident victim, then whisking him or her to the nearest hospital. That indeed is an excellent example of costly collective effort trying to save individual lives. But there is more, much more, to the very idea of saving human lives.

The very act of "saving" invites questions such as: Who are saved or not saved? What are the objective and subjective value standards other than triage? What is the social goal and perspective? Who is saved proactively, and who reactively? When can we do a cost/benefit analysis?

We are familiar with the saying, "Think globally, act locally." Most of our everyday actions involve routinely thinking and acting locally. We nearly always do and value what is apparently best now for ourselves and for our immediate family, even if the collective global result may be negative. The evolution of our species has rewarded self-centered perspectives. Only very recently in the journey of our species toward industrialized modernism have our collective actions had a profound global effect.

I have for a long time been interested in these basic lifesaving questions. In 1974 I finished reading several hundred books in preparation for writing a dissertation-quality philosophical book of my own with about thirty pages of annotated references. *The American Eutopia* has in its title the uncommon word, "eutopia," which means "good place" – as opposed to the better known "utopia," which means no place. I have posted this pre-Internet book thesis at: astronomy-links.net/TheAmericanEutopia.pdf

Much of what I wrote in my twenties, 43 years ago, holds true today. If I were writing this essay today I would have found more support for my thesis, with many more annotated references. The one critical area where I did not then have much data is accelerating global warming. Heat pollution from several billion self-centered aspirational people is already becoming a major consequence of industrialized human activity within our closed global ecosystem.

Publishers I approached in 1974 thought they had fully covered "population issues" with *The Population Bomb*, written in 1968 – so my manuscript was unpublished in that more naive era. The "bomb" book dealt with the ideal of ZPG, zero population growth. My book was the first and only book dealing with the goal of NPG, negative population growth, in an already overpopulated ecosystem. What would today's "saving lives" discussions be like if my 1974 thesis had been printed and widely read?

Today's looming dissolution of polite society has produced a new word describing the profound way we humans are impacting Earth's ecosystem: the *Anthropocene period*. Even with a tsunami of scary scientific data there are influential politicians (funded by carbon polluters) and their echo-system followers who foolishly deny or minimize the growing human component of devastating global warming.

Let us briefly touch on areas that best define what saving lives, both personally and globally, will mean for our collective future. Presidents and their corrupted advisors come and go, but our collective fate is the real crucible. Mother Nature ignores short-term politics.

We humans are systemically not that different from any other species on Earth, past or present. Only a tiny percentage of all species ever on Earth are alive today. Success for any species requires enough individuals within that species to pass their genes on to newer generations. In Africa, for example, the "king of beasts" is not the vanishing African lion, but the likes of termites and ants. Even after termites and ants are gone (hardly imaginable) there will be many types of thriving bacteria and viruses.

It is theorized that many if not all Earth creatures may be descendants of hardy life deep in early meteor fragments blasted off the crust of a formerly vibrant ancient Mars. The same argument can be advanced in the other direction, thanks to our nearby orbits. It is possible that there have been multiple exchanges of DNA in both directions over many millions of years.

Even answering the directional puzzle presented above would not answer the deeper question of how, when, and where life first appeared in our solar system. That is why we are spending billions of dollars on industrial astronomy, trying to detect signs of life on Jupiter and Saturn moons, and on cometary bodies. Finding evidence thereby doesn't answer the galactic chicken vs. egg question. For millennia people have fled to the comfort of anthropocentric ideas of God as the omnipotent creator. Such fantasies move the needle from science to metaphysics. Still, much of today's "real"

science and scientific theory has metaphysics baked in. So where is truth? Can we ever conclusively find truth at all? I say not, because the lesser in size and time can never fully embrace the greater. Both deduction and induction have limits.

I don't care if we never can conclusively find the answer to our ultimate being – God or no god, predestined or random, classical or quantum. We have plenty of information and computer power to hypothetically evaluate everyday life in the here and now. We can develop useful speculations about what the near future might look like, modeling different preconditions, despite never embracing the ultimate historical questions, or our ultimate individual and collective fates. Omniscience could be boring.

In systems theory there is a feedback cause-and-effect relationship among interactions. Yesterday's cause creates today's effect, which becomes tomorrow's cause. In a stable ecosystem, such as in traditional societies before moderns disrupted them, social life is cyclical, not a linear historical experience. The ancestral past is valued as much or more than the present and future. Indeed, the past determines the future. Local religions on a human scale reinforce their structural-functional social hierarchies and value systems. Population levels and resource utilization remain within acceptable limits. This ancient traditional model seems like a societal Garden of Eden, if we overlook some details.

Humans are like, but fundamentally unlike, other animals. We are restless, and we prefer to explore our potential, individually and societally. We don't just look for food, security, and sex; we look for meaning. We call this endless journey progress. Regression is alien to this idea. However, there is aggressive darkness in light, just as there is loving light in darkness.

What is most personal is most general. What happens with individuals ultimately determines what happens to all individuals. What we give to and take from the immediate environment persists to shape our descendants' environment. We have DNA from many long-extinct species. Our today is tomorrow's "remember when." Such is our wheel of life.

The Martian Fallacy

It took 200,000 years for human population to reach one billion. It took only 133 years for us to reach the second billion, and just 44 years to double again. Our world population will hit eight billion people by or before 2025. Even if fecundity slows, the growing people base rules. Do the math.

Population ecologists use the term "Indian equivalents." They are talking about Asian Indians, not American Indians. Not all births have the same impact on global warming. As I mention in my book referenced above, one additional American birth is equal to 25 additional Indian births. That ratio would be higher in some areas of Africa.

The more humans dominate, the more endangered we will soon become. Increasing regional crowding and sharp competition for basic resources, along with retreating coastlines and vast desertification with extreme heat waves – will effectively shrink our available living room and the land that supports us. Mix that in with mountains of waste, polluted and heated seas (where squid and cuttlefish will replace most of today's fish). Top it all off with hyper-aggressive national "leaders" wielding nuclear missiles – and we have a hair-trigger threat to human life on Earth (though not to all life).

Imagine holding a fresh rubber band, then stretching it somewhat. Initially, the band will stretch and be able to return to its previous form. Initially, if we don't stretch it too much, there is room to stretch that band some more. Now imagine progressive stretching to the point where the band has reached its maximum. At that point it still could return to its previous form, but only if it no longer is increasingly stretched. Once it breaks, it's game over. We humans are that rubber band, and our increasingly dangerous actions are the progressive stretching.

Enter the fallacious Mars fantasy….

One of the mantras of "the march of civilization" is, "If it can be done, it will be done." Cultural and national war mongers have long used this myopic mantra to stifle intelligent dissent. Overly ambitious space science also uses this mantra to suck dollars out of the pockets of struggling tax payers. Throw in some exaggerated fear about the imminent demise of human life on Earth, and you have the sweet poison of a Mars land fantasy.

Human populations under population pressure, or simply looking for profits, have looked for land to claim. Think of Rome, the Mongols, the military Muslims, and the papal Christians. Think of the "empty" South American, post-smallpox hemisphere (i.e., empty of white Christians). Think of the equally "empty" American West, which required Manifest Destiny to "civilize." Think too of Hitler's initially very popular land grab – and Stalin's paranoid capture of weak countries on the Soviet Union's western flank. If aggressors can also hide under an umbrella of religious sanction, all the better. At least some of that grab-and-growl genocide has helped modify world population levels. Such is Malthusianism at its worst.

As the relative carrying capacity of Earth's thin skin of life decreases, the fantasies of futurists increase. Now we have Hawking and Musk hawking the idea of escaping a doomed Earth very soon. Our entire species evolution seems at risk in a flicker of time, and only desolate Mars can save us. All it would take is diverting trillions of taxpayer dollars toward the Martian mirage, starving projects on Earth that could do real good for saving our planet. I have three fundamental problems with the Martian fantasy:

(1) It won't work. Going to Mars with up to a million people is doable, though expensive, very expensive. It's something we could do within the next two centuries, but should we? Even after depositing such tonnage of human flesh on Mars' surface, we are going to kill them off if we haven't first terraformed Mars with advanced robots. Even after Mars is terraformed, there is the supreme problem of Mars never having a protective shield against both solar coronal mass ejections and the more deadly cosmic rays.

(2) Let's imagine that we "get out of Dodge" and go to fully terraformed Mars in the nick of time, so to speak. Global thermonuclear war and its subsequent nuclear winters should kill off most – but not all – human life on Earth. There could be more remotely bunkered humans left on Earth than ever were on Mars. Ironically, Earth's nuclear catastrophe may involve two events that wipe out the Mars colonists: (a) there will be no more critical supply ships; and (b) even worse, two nasty nukes launched to Martian colonies will quickly put an end to this fragile experiment.

(3) The third fundamental problem is none other than belief in a God who will rescue us in the end. Currently, much of the non-fear of onrushing global warming's consequences comes from fatalistic Christians who *believe* that God stands watch over us, and will never allow us to perish. Sure.

History has repeatedly witnessed our loving God allowing millions of innocent humans to perish in wars and natural disasters, while looking the other way. What guarantee do we have that God will protect us in the future if we put all our survival hopes on a mystical bet we may not win?

I would rather first rely on well-funded science guided by the highest ethical consciousness. Raw reliance only on mystical faith in a sky god to protect us from global disasters of our own making is dangerous. Even if we first rely on humanistic science, and a protective god intervenes on our behalf anyway, what have we lost? Reverse the priorities, so that we only rely on God, without any well-funded science and humanism to guide us. What happens then? Given these two options, which makes logical sense? Which option will SAVE MORE LIVES?